

Executive Summary

Project Context

While completing the 2000-01 evaluation summary report for the Washington State Arts Commission's Arts Education Community Consortium Grants, it became clear that experienced consortia operate differently than new projects. Experienced consortia tend to have more shared governance, a consistent philosophy and spirit of collaboration, and families are more involved. This case study of two successful consortia was conducted to glean details of what makes them work so well. The lessons are intended to assist new or struggling consortia so that the Commission can continue to use the community consortium strategy to promote sustained arts education programming.

Who Was Studied and How

The two selected sites were Vashon Island and Pend Oreille County.

Vashon, although relatively rural, is in King County close to Seattle and has frequent ferry service. Vashon is a small island district with three schools in close proximity. The Artists in the Schools program of Vashon Allied Arts was a long-standing consortium even before WSAC provided funding. Their consortium was selected to learn from their success and stable structure.

Pend Oreille County is sixty miles north of Spokane, has one of the lowest average incomes in the state, is rural, has a large Native American population (Kalispel Tribe), and high unemployment rates. The Pend Oreille County Arts Education Consortium, led by CREATE in Newport, spreads across three school districts and an entire county. They were selected because their consortium leadership has engaged the far-flung, diverse community and utilized their local artistic talent and cultural heritage instead of importing outside talent.

Both sites were visited for two days in the spring of 2002. A series of interviews, focus groups, and observations of arts activities were designed to gather information on four topic areas:

1. ***History*** - Why and how did they get started? How long did it take?
2. ***Goals and Philosophy*** - What is their goal and has it changed? Does everyone agree?
3. ***Governance and Stability*** - Who makes decisions and how? What keeps them stable and focused? What helps them improve?
4. ***Now and the Future*** - Are there any things they do now that can help others? What do they want to do in the future?

Findings

Area #1 - History

“Bringing people together creates something bigger than themselves.”

Artist on Vashon Island

Becoming something better by using local strengths is a common theme of both the Pend Oreille County and Vashon consortia. Although each site has a different history and reason for forming their consortium, both started by asking themselves the question: “Is this all there is for our kids?” Both sites said, “No, but we have many strengths to build on.” By looking at their untapped community strengths, the stories of both sites tell about developing a vision for arts education and their community by: 1) using local talent, values, and needs; 2) capitalizing on funding opportunities, and; 3) building relationships, trust, and respect between schools and artists. There is a remarkable lack of adult ego at both sites. These consortia are child and community centered.

Although the particulars of the two site histories are different, the strategies they used are very similar. They involved bringing a team of community leaders together to create a vision, seeking input from others, developing a plan, and then making their dream a reality by utilizing mostly local talent along with limited outside expertise. In both cases, they found they had community strengths that were not marshaled. As the project coordinator of the Pend Oreille consortium led by CREATE said, *“Find your community lynchpins – you start there.”*

Lessons from History: Build on your strengths. Using local interests, talents, and values creates a healthier foundation.

Area #2 – Goals and Philosophy

“The community values art here. Arts are not precious, they are everyday.”

Teacher, Vashon Island

When administrators, artists, teachers, and parents of each study consortium were interviewed, it was repeatedly clear all are actively involved in working toward a common vision. Partners know the goals and their contributions to meet those goals. The leadership teams have more details, but other members still know where to go, what to do, and how to access the resources needed to fulfill their particular responsibilities.

Effective communication appears to be the key to having so many people know about the system of arts education in their respective communities. Communication in Vashon and Pend Oreille County is clear, consistent, and frequent. It is done face-to-face when ever possible. Through the use of personalized communication, clearly written and easy to use forms and materials, and regular feedback, everyone involved stays connected to the task.

Just as importantly, the communication system informs change. Feedback, formal and informal, is used. Feeling heard appears to translate to feeling involved. Vashon has a longer history of strong parental involvement while Pend Oreille has not had families involved in the same way or for as long. This difference in the two communities is likely to change with time. The Vashon superintendent, who is new to the community noted: *“This community holds art as a high value, which may not be the case in other places. However, at the same time, the value has been nurtured over time and is now highly visible. So, the value may take time to grow.”* The site coordinators in Pend Oreille intuitively appear to know this as evidenced by one of their comments, *“give it time to allow relationships to be built. It will happen over time.”*

Lessons about Goals and Philosophy: Clear and informational forms are essential, but building a web of personal relationships over time makes people feel heard, invested, and involved.

Area #3 - Governance and Stability

“Leadership qualities are important to a relationship-intensive process. There is a need to be passionate, savvy, and persistent without being disrespectful or pushy.”

Director of Vashon Arts Alliance at the Blue Heron

The management of these two study sites reflects the value they place on relationships. Leadership, budget flow, and decision-making are structured to honor and contribute to the partnerships and the people in them. The partners recognize the value-added benefit for the resources they expend. Additionally, there are many intangible qualities to the governance structures that create stable partnerships and lasting arts education.

The leadership teams at both sites share the work even though one key person (the project coordinator) assumes responsibility for nurturing and focusing. Each site has predictable timetables tied to their work. People know what to expect and feel like their time and needs are valued.

Participation in consortia work (as site coordinator, review panel member) typically enhances other jobs they might have. An administrator commented, *“The [Artists in Schools] panel process, which administrators sit on, helps us see the big picture of what is going on, which in turn helps with other administrative decisions. It is time well spent. Also, the review process is clearly laid out and not personality dependent.”* All work is focused and positive. If a problem occurs, venting is limited and directed to action and solutions.

The leadership teams do not try to do all the work themselves. They rely on support from the school superintendents and arts agency staff, from organizational members and school staff, and from the community. Feeling needed by the system makes people feel honored and accepted.

The intangible in Pend Oreille County's and Vashon's consortia feeds their systems. Every person involved in the site visits had a story to tell about how their consortium made a difference in their lives. They could not imagine moving to a community where the arts were not honored. The stories were richly textured and included diverse benefits, like improved school climate, enhanced classroom instruction, enriched personal and family life, and community connections. Respect is the byword in Pend Oreille County and Vashon.

Lessons about Governance: Use a team of people to do the work. Share the leadership among the team, but have one person keep the vision coordinated and nurtured. Judge success in reaching the vision by tangible and intangible outcomes of the work.

Area #4: Now and the Future

“Art is ideas, an expression of ideas.”

High School Student, Pend Oreille County

“If I had to go back to making Christmas tree ornaments in Styrofoam ...well, I couldn't do it.”

Teacher on Vashon

Strong daily management systems and clear personal communication are important strategies for translating and maintaining the goals, dreams, and system. As the vision and system were implemented, the people at these two sites came to think about the arts differently. They have been delighted to learn that training in the arts enhances education and thinking and can be “so everyday”. They have learned: 1) what it really means to teach the arts as a core subject, 2) that people have a stronger sense of ownership and sense of place when they shape what happens and what it looks like, 3) that the arts help people link thinking and feeling, and 4) new cultural competencies are gained as they learn more about their own local culture, as well as the arts in other cultures.

As the practical and immediate turns to deeper understanding, the consortium strategies evolve. They become more sophisticated and subtle over time, as well as more sequential and comprehensive. During the evolution, many are open to looking at what artistic endeavors are missing and what improvements make sense.

Lessons from Now and for the Future: Arts education does more than impart academic knowledge and studio skills. It is a way of coming to know and interact with the world and life.

The journey behind these stories of building a positive community with a future for children and the arts is long and hard. However, at these two sites, those participating in this study think it a worthy journey. The Pend Oreille site coordinators spoke for many when they collectively said; *“The work creates a sense of gratitude in people for making it happen. It fills a need to have and hold pride, relationships, and knowledge.”*

Recommendations

Stories of other journeys can give leadership teams how-to insight on setting up systems that prevent problems or help resolve ones that are bound to appear. The type of true partnerships and community ownership present in Pend Oreille and Vashon does not happen overnight. However, the Washington State Arts Commission can encourage strong consortia development by implementing the following recommendations.

1. Review application criteria to ensure they reflect findings from these case studies. If they do not, modify them. In particular:
 - Is there strong evidence of planning with broad community input, not just a letter of support? The goal is to make it a community consortium. Therefore, those involved need to be consulted, and the culture of their organization needs to be honored.
 - Does the application use or celebrate local artistic talent, subject matter, local arts materials, or a local need as a way to learn about the arts? Keeping it local in some way enlivens the community and encourages more ownership. The sense of local may take many forms, but if the proposal does not have a local flavor, the proposal may be better suited for another type of funding.
 - Is outside support reserved for talent missing in the community? Does the outside support help build local capacity?
 - Do the applicants have a long-term vision for the arts making a difference in the lives of children and the community? Do they have a sense of how to reach their vision? It need not be in full bloom at the start, but some sense of the future should be present.
 - Look at the structure of how the partners are involved in decisions. The best decisions are made by a team crossing agencies or interest groups.
 - Find out if a majority of the leadership team members have lived in the community long enough to know the community and have an active network of relationships to draw upon.
2. Create a set of sample forms as part of a technical assistance package for other consortia.
3. Set up a peer mentorship program for project directors. This may require setting aside travel money to visit a site that has solved issues similar to their own. The mentors are also likely to benefit from meeting periodically to share stories and strategies that can be compiled for use by each other and other sites.